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In Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador, they became among the most repressive and corrupt armies in Latin America.

"The professionals who do the training are worried about teaching technical capacity, while the policy makers in Washington believe they can change the conduct of armies in Central America," said Richard Millett, a history professor at Southern Illinois University who is an expert on American military policy in Central America. "But the fact is that it is infinitely easier to teach somebody how to run a radio than to teach him how to treat a civilian."

The degree to which the United States can influence local armies appears to vary widely. The Salvadoran Army killed four American churchwomen, two American agrarian advisers and at least one American traveler, as well as perhaps 30,000 to 40,000 Salvadorans from 1980 to 1983, despite intense pressure from Washington to stop.

Now, death squad killings are rare in El Salvador, and the army appears to have stopped massacring civilians. But it is not clear that the army would maintain its good conduct were it not for the constant pressure and payment of its bills by the United States. The Salvadoran Army has never acknowledged that killing civilians is wrong, and several officers involved in well-documented killings remain on active duty.

"What we did was legitimate self-defense in the face of Communist total war," said an army intelligence officer at the crack Arce battalion, which has been trained by the C.I.A. "The dirty war in Argentina was also necessary. We are talking about total war against Communists."

The Military Pipeline: Civilians Have No Role

American influence appears to be increased by the way in which almost a billion dollars in military aid and training has been given to local armies in recent years.

Despite its other efforts to strengthen civilian authority in the region, the Reagan Administration has continued the traditional American practice of funneling military aid directly to local armies and police forces, with almost no influence from civilian officials.

According to accounts by United States officials in Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica, the chief arbiter of whether the army in Honduras or El Salvador gets aid is not the civilian Cabinet or the president of the country, but rather the American ambassador and the head of the army, who "consult" with civilian officials.

The United States Congress then decides on the amount of money finally to be given, most of it in direct grants. It is an arrangement that reflects both the United States' enormous influence over its client states in Central America, the independence of the military and the weakness of civilian governments here.

In addition, the United States appears to spend far less time, money and effort training civilian officials than it does training military commanders.

The one American envoy known to have insisted that army commanders make their aid requests through the civilian president was Ambassador John Ferch in Honduras.

His effort won him the respect of the Honduran President, José Azcona Hoyo, but the ire of the Honduran military high command, according to American and Honduran officials. The friction with the army was reportedly one of the factors that moved the Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, Elliott Abrams, to win approval for the summary dismissal of Mr. Ferch last year.

In Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and Panama, Government officials have virtually no say in whether the aid will be given or how it will be used, according to several diplomats and local officials.

El Salvador, which is in the seventh year of a war against leftist guerrillas, has received the most aid. In Honduras, American officials defend raising military aid from $4.2 million in 1981 to $79.4 million in 1986 on the ground that Honduras faces the threat of an invasion from Nicaragua.

Extra Aid to Honduras: Paying for the Contras

Diplomats and local officials say the Honduran Army also receives hefty assistance as payment for tolerating the presence of the contras. Though the contras' fighting forces are spending more and more time in Nicaragua, their intelligence, medical and logistical centers remain in Honduras.

When Sandinista units attacked contra bases inside Honduras last year, Honduras was given $20 million in "emergency" military aid. Mr. Reagan said the Honduran Government had initiated the request; Mr. Ferch said he had been ordered by the State Department to tell President Azcona to ask for the aid.

Now the Administration wants to give Honduras almost $100 million worth of F-5 jet fighters. Critics call that an extravagance for a land where most of the peasants are unemployed and children die mainly of parasites.

In Central America, Costa Rica alone enjoys a stable democracy. Costa Rican officials say they believe one reason is that Costa Rica abolished its army almost 40 years ago. The country has formed a small border patrol force in recent years, which Costa Rican officials say will not be permitted to grow any larger.

Today the Costa Rican President, Oscar Arias Sánchez, has become the most outspoken advocate in the region for reducing the influence and power of the military as a precondition for stable civilian rule.

"Costa Rica chose butter over guns a long time ago," Mr. Arias said in a recent interview. "In Central America it would be much better to spend money on economic development or education instead of guns. It is so clear, but nobody does it."

A Western European diplomat who has spent several years in Central America agreed with that assessment.

"What the whole region needs is to find a way to demilitarize," he said. "American security concerns do not require these enormous armies."

But given present American worries about the rapid expansion of the Nicaraguan Army, as well as the wars being waged by right-wing rebels in Nicaragua and leftist rebels in El Salvador and Guatemala, neither the strength of local armies nor American willingness to back them seem likely to diminish soon.

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